

News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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EXERCISE RIDER DIES AFTER TRAINING ACCIDENT AT CHURCHILL DOWNS

Odanis 'Cuba' Acuna, 42, Remembered as Tireless Worker Who Was Dedicated to Family

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (Saturday, Nov. 10, 2018) – Odanis Acuna, a veteran exercise rider for trainer **Kenny McPeek**, died early Saturday morning during a training accident at Churchill Downs. He was 42.

The tragic accident occurred at approximately 5:45 a.m. when Acuna was breezing unraced 2-year-old **New York Harbor**. Nearing completion of the workout, the colt and Acuna suddenly fell about a sixteenth of a mile before the finish line when New York Harbor endured catastrophic injuries.

Onsite emergency medical technicians who arrived on the scene to treat Acuna believe he died instantly.

“Today is a somber day,” said Churchill Downs Racetrack President **Kevin Flanery**. “We extend our deepest sympathy to Odanis’ family, friends, colleagues and the entire team at trainer Kenny McPeek’s barn. Our hearts are with them in this difficult time of extreme sorrow.”

Known to his racetrack friends as “Cuba” – a nod to his native homeland – Acuna is remembered by friends as a tireless worker who was dedicated to improving the life of his family.

“Odanis was one of the hardest working guys you’d ever meet; he was working the American dream,” said McPeek, who employed Acuna for nearly a decade. “He galloped for me in the morning and worked for the feed company in the afternoon.”

“He was just a wonderful, wonderful person,” said **Sherry Stanley**, Executive Director of the **Backside Learning Center** at Churchill Downs. “His entire existence was focused on bringing his wife and three sons from Cuba to here in Kentucky. He was just about to finish the process of purchasing a home and the immigration paperwork to get them green cards.

“He was the hardest worker. I know everyone always says that about people on the backside but this guy was unbelievable. He worked as an exercise rider and went running out the gates after training every day to get on the feed trucks. He would work every day until 6 or 7 at night and always had a smile on his face. No one ever saw him angry or sad. He was just the happiest, most joyful person who was completely focused on his goal of getting his family here to Kentucky and settling down. This is just an unbelievable tragedy.”

“When he started with me he had little or nothing and he got himself pretty well setup and had been saving money,” McPeek said. “He bought himself a car and was getting ready to buy a house. He was hard at it all day, every day. We worked together a long time and he traveled with us wherever we went. He rode a lot of my best horses for years and was a guy who could handle just about any horse you put him on. He was just a good guy and loved what he was doing. I am just sickened by this tragedy.”

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This was first known training accident at Churchill Downs that resulted in the death of an exercise rider in several decades, according to veteran horsemen and track officials.

Training at Churchill Downs ceased Saturday morning shortly after the accident. A moment of silence will be observed at approximately 12:30 p.m. (all times Eastern) in Acuna's honor prior to Saturday's first race at 1 p.m.

Funeral arrangements, a memorial service and fundraising efforts for the family are pending.

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